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SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ELA

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TAGS: PREL KPAQ YM SY UNSC

SUBJECT: REACTIONS TO MEHLIS REPORT: MOSTLY NOT THERE

REF: SINGH EMAIL OCTOBER 24

Classified By: DCM Nabeel Khoury for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶11. (U) Summary: Government newspapers took the lead, covering and commenting on the October 20 UN Mehlis report implicating Syrian and Lebanese security officials in the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri. While op-eds in the official press took no stance on the report, the independent press expressed doubt over Mehlis' findings. The Yemeni street seemed mostly indifferent to the report although interlocutors conveyed that there was some apprehension over the USG's possible reaction. End Summary.

The ROYG: No (Official) Comment

¶12. (C) Although there was no official public ROYG reaction to the report, Deputy FM Mohiedeen Al-Dhabi, discussed it at length during an October 24 meeting with Ambassador. Dhabi observed that Syria's "aggressive action" was unacceptable and he anticipated that the report would have a great impact on the Arab world since it seemed that "everyone was upset" with Syria. Referring to the USG's actions thus far, the DFM commended the USG for a "well-played game," but stressed the importance of letting the UN process move forward without USG pressure since it would force Arab countries to rally behind Syria.

The Press: Some Coverage and Little Insight

¶13. (U) Government and ruling party-backed papers covered the report extensively, usually without comment. The official government newspaper, "Al-Thawra," published two op-ed pieces that merely reiterated Mehlis' implication of Syrian security forces in Hariri's assassination. In its October 24 op-ed, "Thawra" remarked that the USG was likely seeking regime change in Syria, but did not attribute the report's outcome to USG actions.

¶14. (U) Only three newspapers in the independent and opposition press carried op-eds on Mehlis. In an October 24 op-ed, carried by the independent English weekly Yemen Times, commentator Hassan al-Haifi wrote that the Hariri assassination was no doubt the work of the Israeli intelligence service, Mossad. Haifi asserted that implicating the Syrian Government was another method that Israel was using to force the USG into a confrontation with Hezbollah's allies. "Al-Wahdawi," newspaper of the Nasserite opposition party, carried an op-ed the same day calling for unification against Mehlis, which it warned was a "pretext" to punishing both Syria and Lebanon.

¶15. (U) On October 30, the opposition political party Islah's Internet news service, "Al-Sahwa.net," reported on an unofficial poll of 218 persons showing that 73% of Yemenis felt that Syria would face economic sanctions as a result of the report, 19% thought that the report was a prelude to a military invasion, and 8% hoped that diplomacy would resolve the issue. (Note: Sahwa polls are unofficial and nonscientific. End Note).

The Street: Just Don't Invade Syria!

¶16. (C) The topic was also noticeably absent during numerous Ramadan late-night social sessions attended by emboffs and in Friday mosque sermons attended by embassy staff. On the Yemeni street, there were no public reactions. Hammoud Munasar, chief correspondent for the "Al-Arabiya" news channel, noted that, despite this, many people -- particularly among the Yemeni intellectual community -- were following the report. Munasar also said that many Yemenis "from Sheikhs to teachers" are livid at Syria, but equally suspicious of the USG's intentions to use Mehlis as "another pretext to invade yet another part of the Arab world."

¶17. (C) Comment. Thus far, overall reaction to the report's findings can be characterized as indifferent. Yemenis seem preoccupied with the 2006 Presidential election, Saleh's

upcoming visit to Washington, and the Muslim holiday season. The one common theme that does emerge is a fear that the United States will use the Mehlis report as a prelude to invading Syria. The mood was best articulated by a mid-level bureaucrat at the Ministry of Education who told poloff, "There is not much talk of the report since we are all busy with Ramadan and Eid. It is not like you (USG) actually invaded Syria or anything." End Comment.
Krajeski